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ABSTRACT

The problematic survival of the small, usually private college or university plagues those concerned with higher education in the U.S. Faculty, administrators, students and trustees see an uncertain future for their institutions. However, changes in management, cost reduction, and income production enhance the chances for survival of threatened institutions. This paper reviews the fiscal and enrollment crisis and institutional trouble-spots. Management concepts that encourage more effective resource use are described and instructional and operating cost-cutting strategies are explained. The paper concludes with a description of income production methods that emphasizes admissions-marketing and institutional uniqueness. (Author)

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SMALL COLLEGE MANAGEMENT: KEY TO SURVIVAL

by David A. Trivett

The problematic survival of the small, usually private college or university plagues those concerned with higher education in the U.S. Faculty, administrators, students and trustees see an uncertain future for their institutions. However, changes in management, cost reduction, and income production enhance the chances for survival of threatened institutions. This paper reviews the fiscal and enrollment crisis and institutional trouble-spots. Management concepts that encourage more effective resource use are described and instructional and operating cost-cutting strategies are explained. The paper concludes with a description of income production methods that emphasizes admissions-marketing and institutional uniqueness. With few exceptions, sources are those identified in ERIC's *Research in Education* (RIE) or *Current Index to Journals of Education* (CIJE).

FINANCIAL AND ENROLLMENT CRISIS

It is helpful to understand the dimensions and causes of the financial crisis in higher education. Doubtful financial soundness is widespread in higher education and has increased in the past few years. A decline in rate of income growth or in absolute income has occurred concurrently with rapidly rising costs. While objectives and goals grew, inflation, rising faculty salaries, increased student aid, campus-disturbance bills and theft and destruction boosted costs. Enrollment increases during the sixties made colleges and universities appear sound. Now, growth has ceased or regression occurred; costs continue to rise. Income from enrollment expansion no longer fills the gap between expenditures and costs [8]. In many industries rising costs have been overcome through increased productivity. But, higher education is a labor intensive industry. "Productivity" of faculty members can be increased only slightly without loss of student-teacher interaction [7].

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The financial crisis has special impact on smaller, private colleges and universities. According to Jellema's calculations, most of these schools were showing an operating deficit by 1968-69 and were in debt equal to 26 percent of the book value of their assets. In response to deficit, they were borrowing money, transferring funds, or raising tuition. The surveyed institutions projected increased income, but long-range trends belied that expectation [16]. In a later study, Jellema found a "grave situation"; average projected deficits of $104,000 had been $131,000 in fact. Deficits were common in all institutional types and geographic regions. He predicted failure of up to 100 institutions if "business as usual" management continued. Small private institutions are severely hit because their drawing power is limited, they can scale down operations only so far (and still call themselves a college), and each student loss shrinks income [17].

In a more recent study of 48 private four-year liberal arts colleges, Jenny and Wynn found a worsening financial condition with no improvement in long-term expenditure trends and continued growth in deficits. They conclude that colleges have experienced more inflation than the economy as a whole, but produced only a little more growth. Students have paid for the difference between productivity and costs. Five factors are associated with the overall financial malaise: (1) a decline in public confidence, (2) a change in public and private priorities (including a shift toward vocational objectives), (3) demands from students and parents for accountability, (4) too much power to those without responsibility in the governance of colleges and universities, and (5) poor management practices [18]. A study of the financial problems and future of private education in Pennsylvania found more independent schools in Pennsylvania showing a deficit in 1970-71, compared with previous years, while the average school operated in the black. Unfortunately, the fiscal improvement was regarded as short term, resulting from "abnormal" tuition increase rather than from fundamental management improvement [48].

Dismal reports on enrollment trends for private higher education exacerbate the financial scene. Jellema surveyed the application picture of 431 private colleges and universities for 1965-66 through a projected 1971-72. Over the last years of the 60's, rates of admission were raised generally to counterbalance a lower rate of application. Still, the percentage of increase of actual enrollment in small colleges declined during a period of generally increasing enrollment in higher education. The sharpest decline was shown by institutions in the two smallest size categories, 1-500 and 501-1,000 students [15].

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BAROMETERS OF INSTITUTIONAL TROUBLE

Cheit found several factors usually present where institutions were not in financial trouble, but no *single* factor to explain financial soundness [8]. The *Survival Through Change* checklist suggests that ready signs of ill health are apparent when one scrutinizes students, departments, faculty, financing, management and planning. For example: Is enrollment dropping and recruitment lackadaisical or student body composition changing without notice and response? Do too many chairmen shepherd too many faculty teaching too few courses with too few students? Are trustees loafing while tuition rises in importance as a source of income? Is there no institutional research, long-range planning, or cost analysis? Positive answers are signs of trouble and require action [42].

NEEDED: A CHANGE TO MODERN MANAGEMENT

For institutions in trouble to survive, a fundamental change must occur: costs must match income so financial solvency prevails [8]. The general drift of the suggestions to accomplish that objective may be found in Reinert's list of self-help elements. The emphasis is on institutional self-scrutiny and analysis, ranging from decisions about college goals to steps to eliminate "dead wood" [37]. No element of institutional life can remain untouched by introspection. There is near universal agreement with Jellema that long-term future public support of higher education rests on getting the house in order, on increasing the efficiency of fiscal management broadly conceived [14]. In addition, most critics would agree with Moon that serious planning for the future can not rest on expectations of more income. Rather, the key lies in the optimal use of resources within the campus walls [28].

Most commentators call for improvement in the management of institutions in order to "(1) carefully analyze the relations between the uses of resources and the accomplishment of goals, (2) seek maximum economies with minimal sacrifices in quality, and (3) encourage rapid and flexible adaptation to changes in needs . . ." [7, p.1]. Malcolm Severance argues that the previous reluctance to accept management in higher education may boil down to a conceptual issue. For example, what is an output, an input, a cost or a benefit in the world of higher education? For administrators to manage the resources of higher education efficiently, modern management procedures that utilize such concepts must be employed [40; also McGrath, 26].

Within modern management techniques, the *systems approach* is a method of thinking that tries to interrelate all variables, base decision on reliable data, systematically evaluate outcomes of programs, and plan ahead. It is particularly apt for the problems small colleges face now. The study of a system, its structure, parts, interaction, and processes is referred to as *systems analysis*. Shoemaker notes that when the systems approach is used in resource allocation, questions are asked such as what resources are required, at what time and place, to what extent, and with what degree of goal achievement. Then alternative goals and program objectives can be considered [41].

Information. Better information about costs and income is essential if decisions are to be made that increase efficiency. Generally, colleges and universities have been negligent in collecting data useful to the analysis of costs and income [8]. Research offices are frequently recommended to provide information needed for decisions. Better data is potentially useful for questions of accountability and in seeking funds [37]. Particularly useful is research information comparing similar institutions and specific costs of programs and departments in terms of their outputs [7].

Cost effectiveness. Traditionally, few in education have evaluated the cost of a program in terms of resources required against what is produced [4]. Yet, the Carnegie Commission observes that cost *[benefit] analysis* [or *cost effectiveness*] is the most important step in effective resource use [7]. How much does it cost to maintain an FTE student in history or chemistry or to graduate a music major? Programs where benefits exceed costs are obviously desirable, and efficiency is more likely if programs are ranked in order of costs [40].

Budgets. In higher education budgets have customarily been used for fund accounting (hence the line item style); however, new concepts of budgeting stress their role in decisionmaking about future courses of action [40]. As early as 1961, Tickton proposed that colleges prepare budgets 10 years in advance. The budget projection would be a neutral document for analysis through which various assumptions could be tried on a "what-if" basis. Implications for cost-cutting and income production would be clear if the trial budget had to balance [46]. More attention to long range plans is implicit in most systematic budget proposals [10]. Maeder provides an example of optimal resource planning done by a private institution trying to find its own best student mix [25]. At least one systematic approach to budgeting is available that provides explanation, detailed forms, and flow charts [33].

A close relation between desirable programs and resource allocation is the goal of the well-known *program planning and budget systems*, or *PPBS* approach. Goals and objectives are developed; programs posited to achieve them; resources and benefits estimated; operating plans devised; long-term fiscal effects evaluated; programs chosen and actuated; and results evaluated. Then the process is begun anew. The result (theoretically) is that efficiency can be determined and successful programs related to long-term institutional plans [30, 11, 49].

Smaller institutions must be aware of the *economies of scale*. Astin and Lee, in a sympathetic study on the plight of small colleges, recommend that each college try to maintain at least 1,000 students. Students will benefit from the small college atmosphere and per student costs to the college will be lower [3, 7].

CUTTING COSTS

Six general types of budget cutback might be utilized to trim costs: selective, across the board, program consolidation, program readaptation, "every program earns its own way," and central reassignment of vacated positions. However, major cost reductions can be achieved by looking closely at the instructional budget [7].

Instructional costs. Because faculty salaries are a major proportion of budget expenditures, much attention has been directed toward increasing the productivity of the faculty. In 1959, Ruml saw colleges facing more demands for services coupled with needs for higher faculty salaries. For him, the key to reducing instructional costs (and providing better salaries) was to increase the number of students per faculty to an average ratio of 20:1. Ruml proposed to achieve that ratio by the use of a few large lecture sections [38]. His proposals are often cited in contemporary studies. For example, Jenny and Wynn argue that an increase in student-faculty ratio will enable institutions to control per student instructional expenditures. They found an average ratio of 12.22:1 in their 48 college study [18]. Numerous methods of increasing the ratio are in use; many are described by Behrens [5]. Concrete figures on the economic benefits of increasing the ratio are also available from another financial study [48].

In a study designed to find ways to improve instruction and decrease costs, Bowen and Douglass consider five modes of instruction. With a cost simulation model they are able to demonstrate that an eclectic mixture of instructional plans will decrease the per student instructional cost. Course proliferation is singled out as the chief villain [6].

Costs are cut when instruction moves out of the classroom. For example, *work study plans* provide many advantages: learning occurs in a less costly setting than the classroom; the capacity of the campus physical plant is expanded; an increased enrollment can be served without proportional increases in costs. Of course, a work study plan must be carefully marketed and numerous factors considered prior to its implementation. However, Rauh documents the potential savings from work study for those institutions where it is feasible [36].

Student aid expenditures. As a source of rising costs, student aid expenditures are second only to instructional costs. Increases in cost of tuition must be met by increased student aid, particularly if needier students are to be attracted to the school. Jenny and Wynn found a 16.1 percent annual compound rate of increase in student aid cost. They warn that further escalation in aid costs would offset any benefits from more efficient operation [18].

Consortia. Within limits, forming or joining a consortium or other cooperative venture may help an institution reduce instructional costs and other operating expenses [13, 32, 50]. The small private college might meet a specific student need by drawing on consortia facilities, rather than by adding the facility to its own budget [44]. Cooperative ventures can increase educational benefits to students, promote heterogeneity on campus, encourage innovation, improve institutional ability to attract external funding and lead to more efficient use of institutional resources [31]. Numerous additional examples of successful cooperative ventures can be found in *Putting Cooperation to Work* [39].

Other strategems. Incentives are frequently proposed as a budgetary device to promote cost-saving within departments or units. A percentage of budget allocation not spent is returned to the saver for use the following budget year [7]. Some approaches for saving money through personnel management are available [27]. Finally, if one is looking for a grab-bag of money-saving ideas, perhaps for use as a budget committee primer, 319 suggestions are available [45].

INCOME PRODUCTION

Development effort. For most small colleges, income means students. Unfortunately, optimistic expectations for new students are not warranted [15]. Nor are large amounts of additional-income forthcoming. For this reason, Umbeck has argued that new sources of income must be found such as risk-taking ventures, e.g., real estate [47]. Leslie argues that a revolution is needed in the management of development programs [24]. This theme is reiterated by Frantzreb. Management skills will be necessary during the seventies; concepts such as sales, goals, schedules, profit, productivity will be commonplace [12]. As with the management of resources, planning will be a crucial aspect of development efforts to promote survival [1]. [Those who wish ideas on development in small colleges might read *Development*, compiled by CASC [9].]

Traditional sources of funds are still available to some extent. Anderson observes that few institutions have good fund raising programs. He discusses a range of techniques that comprise a rounded fund-raising program [2]. Alumni are still largely untapped sources of funds. Laukhuff, citing the 18 percent rate of alumni giving, urges colleges to pursue their alumni vigorously [23]. Trustees may not be doing their part. In a variation of "the buck stops here," usually applied to presidents, Pray asserts that trustees have final responsibility for the fiscal health of colleges. They must demand new management techniques and educational breakthrough, but primarily they must aid survival by assisting management, setting policy, and sponsoring the institution in its public appeal for funds [35].

Admissions program. For small private colleges in particular, there is no way to avoid the need to attract students; survival depends on it [3]. The admissions program—particularly the manner in which it is conducted—will provide the necessary flow of students. An institution about to embark on a revised admissions program should focus on the current program first, asking questions about its cost effectiveness. Numerous evaluative points are suggested by Johnson [19, 20]. For example, is the admissions effort recognized as important throughout the college? Is the program earning its way? Since there is competition for students, the effort to find them must be viewed as a system [43, 21]. This can be accomplished by viewing the admissions effort as a *marketing* program. When the survival problem is seen through a marketing paradigm, it boils down to "the concept of uncovering specific needs, satisfying these needs by the development of appropriate goods and services; letting people know of their availability, and offering them at appropriate prices, at the right time and place. . ." [22, p.380]. Specific aspects of marketing can be applied to the admissions effort by asking questions such as: what are students, parents and alumni looking for? What is the true nature of the available product? How can the product be brought to the consumer (advertising, personal selling, pricing) [22]?.

The *personal touch* of concern for students is a demonstrated asset to private institutions and should not be overlooked [3]. It is no less important in the "marketing" effort, yet may be neglected—as when letters of inquiry are not answered, or alumni representatives fail to contact prospects [2]. Once students are recruited, personal concern expressed through efforts to retain students who are in personal or academic difficulty is both fiscally and humanly sound [7].

Institutional identity. The final survival technique facilitates the marketing approach, cost reduction, and better management. Each institution must find its unique identity and role. Rising costs, declining income, and falling enrollments prevent each college from being everything to everybody. The prospective student will be asking what benefit comes from paying more to go college X rather than university (or college) Z. The school that has chosen its goals and objectives can provide an answer to that student, operate more efficiently, and increase the odds for its survival [34, 42, 29].

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